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Constraints of Pronunciation Teaching in Vietnam: Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Thi Thanh Huyen Phuong
FPT University, Vietnam

Introduction

Pronunciation pedagogy has always been identified as the most challenging area of English Language Teaching (ELT) but is often paid little attention in both classrooms and in research. Moreover, the field has even been called the 'neglected orphan of second language acquisition studies' (Deng et al., 2009, p. 1). Consequently, teachers are ultimately faced with more challenges than in any other fields of ELT. The literature in the field has also indicated several obstacles including especially poor teacher training (Derwing, 2018; Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011) and inadequate teaching materials (see, for example, Derwing, Diepenbroek, & Foote, 2013). Teachers in such EFL contexts as Vietnam, due to their NNETs status may have additional hurdles to overcome. It has been widely reported that the NNETs status has discouraged EFL teachers in many contexts in teaching pronunciation (e.g., Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Levis, Sonsaat, Link, & Barriuso, 2016; Ma, 2012).

In Vietnam, English pronunciation is often avoided or poorly addressed. The factors possibly contributing to this avoidance, however, are under-researched to date. It is also low-profile as to what extent Vietnamese teachers are responding to these constraints. While this knowledge is critically important to inform educational administrators and policy makers about the assistance teachers should be provided in order to improve pronunciation pedagogy in Vietnam and similar contexts, teachers' accounts of this issue has not yet been taken into consideration.

Literature Review

Constraints for Pronunciation Teaching in the World

A widely reported constraint is the neglect of pronunciation teaching methods in TESOL programs, even in ESL contexts such as the U.S. (Murphy, 2014), Canada (Foote et al., 2011), the UK (Burgess & Spencer, 2000) and Australia (MacDonald, 2002). The poor training has consequently caused teachers throughout the world to feel a lack of confidence to teach pronunciation (see, for example, Al-ghazo, 2013; Baker, 2014; Foote et al., 2011; Murphy, 2014). Recently, with the increasing awareness of the importance of pronunciation teaching, pronunciation programs have been included in pre-service teacher-training courses in more contexts, for example China and Korea (Robertson, 2003). However, it is

claimed that there has yet been a successful transfer of this knowledge to teachers' teaching practice (Robertson, 2003).

If the position of pronunciation teaching in the English curriculm is considered, the situation is also quite disheartening. The application of the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) with the focus on fluency rather than accuracy has contributed greatly to the lowering status of pronunciation teaching in ELT (Foote, Trofimovich, Collins, & Urzúa, 2016). This downplay of pronunciation in the CLT approach has, in turn, contributed to the exclusion of pronunciation from English curricula and assessment systems (Lim, 2016; Liu, 2011). This fact has also led teachers to question the necessity and the compatibility of teaching pronunciation in their communicative English classes (Foote et al., 2016).

Regarding teaching resources, textbooks and materials for pronunciation teaching have recently claimed to be more available to teachers. However, pronunciation teaching in the EFL world still heavily depends on multi-skill English textbooks, in which the pronunciation content is neither systematic nor holistic (Derwing, Diepenbroek & Foote 2013), nor consistently treated (Derwing et al., 2013).

Constraints for Pronunciation Teaching in Asia and Vietnam

As previously discussed, while pronunciation teaching is challenging for teachers of English all over the world, obstacles may be more numerous for EFL teachers. In many Asian countries, pronunciation is not evident in curriculum-design processes, for example in Cambodia (Lim, 2016), China (Liu, 2011; Robertson, 2003) and Korea (Robertson, 2003). It should also be noted that in a region where the education system is test-driven, teachers' and students' attention to pronunciation content can be easily shifted towards the examinable or assessable aspects of the curriculum (Liu, 2011).

Secondly, as EFL teachers elsewhere, Asian teachers have to overcome a huge hurdle of being NNESTs. Despite the critical role that teachers play in modelling spoken English, teachers in some Asian contexts feel reluctant to speak English in the class (Le, 2013; Robertson, 2003). Despite their confidence in their command of English and their knowledge of how to teach pronunciation, Taiwanese teacher trainees believe they are not wanted due to their non-native accents (Ma, 2012). Cambodian teachers were reluctant to use their English as a class model despite them comfortably embracing their NNEST identity (Lim, 2016).

Thirdly, learners' reticence may pose another challenge for pronunciation pedagogy in such Asian contexts as Vietnam. This characteristic is rooted in a cultural and educational discourse where questioning seniors and authority may be considered inappropriate social conduct. As a result, when investigating learners' perception of feedback on pronunciation, Phuong and Phuong (2019) find that Vietnamese learners are reluctant to ask teachers for help with aspects of English pronunciation that they are in need of support.

In Vietnam, Vietnamese learners often have difficulties in making themselves understood in English. However, there is no research to date which specifically investigates factors that may have been limiting the effectiveness of pronunciation pedagogy in the country except for some research focusing on the interference of L1 phonology in English pronunciation acquisition of Vietnamese learners (Nguyen & Ingram, 2004; Zielinski, 2006). The current study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by making teachers' views and classroom practices available for analysis. The research focuses on two research questions:

1) What are the difficulties facing Vietnamese teachers in pronunciation teaching?
2) To what extent are Vietnamese teachers in the context of this study trying to address those obstacles?

Methods

The theme of the present paper emerges from a larger project which is based at a university in Vietnam (Phuong, 2018). Students at the university are required to complete a six-month English Preparation Course (EPC), which aims to prepare them to study subjects within their majors in English. Ten teachers teaching EPC agreed to participate in the research upon my invitation. The ten teachers had achieved their master's degrees in TESOL either in Vietnam or abroad and were between 30 and 40 years old.

The current report draws upon data from the interview with teachers, class observation and document analysis. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese so as to facilitate teachers' full responses in in-depth discussions. Data was transcribed, translated into English by the first author and analysed thematically.

Two classes of each interviewed teacher were also observed and audio-recorded making up a total of 30-hours of classroom data. The observations were aimed to provide an insight into how constraints were affecting teachers' classroom practices and/or how teachers were responding to constraints. In addition, English curricula and textbooks in use were also analysed.

Findings and Discussion

Time Constraints

The current research indicates that pronunciation is not officially a part of the curriculum. Each level of the EPC was based on a textbook in the series *Top-notch* (Saslow & Ascher, 2015b) and *Summit* (Saslow & Ascher, 2015a). The total teaching time allocated for each level is 105 hours within a six-week period. Students had a 3-hour class every day, six days a week. Out of the total teaching time, five hours were for on-going assessment with five progress tests, each of which was conducted at the end of every two textbook units. Notably, these tests were to assess students' listening and reading skills, grammar and vocabulary, but not speaking and pronunciation. Given that each unit had to be completed in 10 hours, students were introduced to a great amount of knowledge every day and took a test every three days.

Illuminating the findings from the curriculum analysis, teacher participants in the current research claimed not to be officially afforded with instruction time. Six teachers claimed that they did not teach pronunciation regularly. One of the teachers, Nu explained that "in such a limited amount of time, we have to complete so many things" and thus, "there could be not enough time for pronunciation" (Interview 1). As such, the absence of pronunciation in the curriculum has consequently made this aspect optional. Nu further commented that "this [the fact of teaching pronunciation irregularly] discourages not only teachers from teaching but also learners from learning" (Interview 1). Even those teachers with a high level of confidence in their ability to make pronunciation instruction as "stimulating and effective as the instruction of any other English aspects or skills" (Le, Interview 1) and were motivated to teach it, found themselves restricted by the lack of time. Le captured the sentiments of her colleagues saying that "all we need is time" (Interview 1). The curricular challenges facing pronunciation instruction, however, are not unique to this context. English teachers have often reported to have insufficient time to properly address pronunciation, especially when pronunciation is not a part of the curriculum (see, for example, Lim, 2016; Liu, 2011; Robertson, 2003) or not a component of the examination (Lim, 2016; Liu, 2011).

The Status of Non-native English-speaking Teachers

Another prominent theme is teachers' struggle with the challenges arising from their NNEST status. First, it is teachers' profound dissatisfaction with their own spoken English as under standard. This perception was acknowledged by several teachers. One of the teachers, Hanh revealed that 'I am not confident with my own pronunciation. It does not sound standard and I still make mistakes sometimes, and these really discourage me from teaching pronunciation (Interview 1). Another teacher, Anh, said she

often told her students not to mimic her English pronunciation as a model. Sharing the same view, Tu claimed, and was also observed, to never let her students repeat after her; rather she would ask students to practise repetition after the audio files spoken by native speakers to minimise the influence of her English on their pronunciation. The literature has also noted that NNESTs tend to be more assured with a native-like accents (Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Ma, 2012); similarly, teachers in the current study tend to feel a lack of legitimacy to teach English pronunciation due to their accented English.

However, for some teachers, the perception of their so-called "non-standard pronunciation" unexpectedly serves as a source of motivation for them to better their English and pedagogy instead. Nu claimed that due to her "not perfect" pronunciation, she paid more attention to correcting her own pronunciation while Tu said "my English is not standard …and if I make mistakes, then their [students'] attitude to me will be different. So, I always pay attention to perfecting my own pronunciation (Interview 2). By describing her pronunciation as "not standard", Tu's comment, again, illustrates the profound influence of native-speakerism. However, it is notable that the perceived weakness of her pronunciation appears to be motivating her to improve her own English pronunciation.

Inadequate Teacher Training for Pronunciation Instruction

While the questions about teachers' training in phonology and pronunciation pedagogy were not directly raised in this study, six out of the ten interviewed teachers volunteered information about the lack of training in both areas in their teacher education. Tu disclosed that "when I was at the university, we were taught about methodology to teach other skills, but not for pronunciation (Interview 2). Moreover, all six teachers highlighted inadequate training as the major cause of their low self-confidence in pronunciation teaching. One representative teacher, Hanh, said "the only way I know to teach pronunciation is asking students to listen and repeat. It just does not work but I don't know what else to do (Interview 1). Hanh's heavy reliance on "listen and repeat" and feelings of helplessness when not knowing how to motivate students in pronunciation learning were also found among other teachers, some of whom described their own pronunciation teaching as 'boring' and admitted having "no ideas to improve it" (Thao, Interview 1). While investigating learners' perspectives of pronunciation pedagogy in Vietnam, Phuong (2019) finds that without proper knowledge of teaching methodology, many teachers have skipped or limited the instruction of some aspects of English pronunciation that students have a strong demand for. This finding is not unexpected as teaching methodology has been indicated as a major demotivating factor for Vietnamese learners of English (Trang & Baldauf, 2007).

In contrast with the majority, one teacher, Thuy, did not name teaching methods as an obstacle. However, when discussing teaching pronunciation separately, she was concerned that regular lessons exclusively for pronunciation would be "boring experiences for both teachers and students" (Interview 1). This fear may reflect the limited preparation she got to properly address pronunciation as a separate subject.

It seems that the limited knowledge of how to teach pronunciation is the major cause of the teachers' lack of confidence. The literature has indicated that teachers' cognition and teaching practice are significantly influenced by their prior language learning experience (Baker, 2014). In this case, such experience does not seem to be a helpful source of reference for teachers.

Teachers' Pronunciation Teaching Practices in the Face of Constraints

Teachers' reported practices

Given the multiple constraints identified, one pertinent question to ask teachers in the interviews is how willing they were to teach pronunciation. Teachers' responses vary significantly dividing teachers into two groups. The majority indicated limited pronunciation teaching provided for different reasons. Dung stated that she taught pronunciation "only when introducing new vocabulary because of the time lack of time" (Interview 2). On her part, Hong said "I don't think it is important to teach pronunciation

because here students can still be understood despite their incorrect pronunciation (Interview 1). This finding is not surprising given the avoidance of pronunciation teaching exercised in different contexts (see, for example, Foote et al., 2011; MacDonald, 2002). However, three teachers reported that they actually taught pronunciation as frequently as they could:

> Teaching pronunciation is very important, you know; so, I teach it regularly…like in every lesson (Thuy, Interview 1)
> I often embed pronunciation teaching in the teaching of other skills and aspects including grammar. That makes the learning of all aspects more fun for students. (Anh, Interview 2)

Clearly, constraints have hindered many teachers from teaching English pronunciation to some extent. However, several others were still trying to bring their students as much instruction on this aspect as possible.

Teachers' classroom practices

Classroom observations (see Table 1) shows that teachers' time and efforts devoted to pronunciation teaching vary greatly and do not necessarily have a straight correlation with teachers' reported practice. On the one hand, teachers who showed a high level of confidence and willingness to teach pronunciation at interviews actually illustrated significant attention to pronunciation in their classes. Thuy, Le and Anh were also among the four who spent the most time on pronunciation (38%, 34%, 12% respectively). Moreover, only in their classes, could self-designed pronunciation activities be observed. Field notes taken during the observations indicate students' high motivation and engagement in those activities. It appears that the self-confidence and eagerness to teach pronunciation enabled these three teachers to move away from the well beaten path to discover and bring more creative activities into their classes that suited their particular students. On the other hand, teachers who reported reluctance in teaching pronunciation tended to rely heavily on textbooks. No self-designed pronunciation activities were observed in their classes. For example, there were five occasions of pronunciation teaching in Hong and Thao's classes and six in Binh's; however, all of those took the form of students listening to and repeating a vocabulary list or reading aloud a textbook conversation.

The duration of pronunciation teaching in those teachers' classes seems shorter as well. Nu, for instance, almost skipped pronunciation all together. Hanh spent just one minute out of three-hour classes for pronunciation in her first observed class and no pronunciation teaching was evident in the second.

TABLE 1
The Amount of Time Spent on Pronunciation Teaching by Teacher

Teachers	Teacher-developed activities No. observed (time span)	Textbook activities No. observed (time span)	Incidental instruction including corrective feedback No. observed (time span)	Total instruction time /3 hours observed (%)	Class levels
Anh	1 (5m 40s)	3 (3 to 6m)	8 (2s to 1m)	21m 27s **(12%)**	Pre
Binh		6 (1 to 3m)	0	13m **(7%)**	Pre
Dung		1 (1m 50s)	13 (4s to 2m)	9m 47s **(5%)**	E
Hanh		1 (1m)	10 (2 to 8s)	1m 25s **(0.8%)**	E
Hong		5 (2 to 23 23m 50s)	7 (44s to 15 s)	47m 20s **(26%)**	E
Le	3 (from 6 to 31m)		16 (3s to 3m)	1h 15s **(34%)**	Pre
Nu		0	2 (2s each)	4s **(0%)**	Pre
Thao		4 (1.5 to 6m)	11 (2s to 36s)	14m 46s **(8%)**	E
Thuy	3 (8 to 30m)		7 (20s to 1.5 m)	1h 12m 42s **(38%)**	A
Tu		2 (2 and 4m)	13 (3s to 1m 2s)	10m 32s **(6%)**	Pre

Notes: E (Elementary); Pre (Pre-intermediate); A (Advanced)

The relationship between teachers' reported practice and actual practice is not always straight. Hong, for example, was one of those teachers who reported low self-confidence and high reluctance to teach pronunciation; she however, was observed to devote the most class time (26%) for pronunciation. Hong tended to make the most of textbook activities to teach pronunciation including students' listening and repeating word lists, reading aloud textbook dialogues in pairs.

Table 1 also indicates that effort and time allocated to pronunciation are not clearly related to learners' English levels. The three teachers who spent the most time on teaching pronunciation were in charge of three different levels. Their willingness to teach pronunciation and their self-confidence seem to be the key factors in their taking up the challenge of teaching pronunciation rather than who they were teaching.

Conclusion and Implications

This research has found several factors that limited the opportunities and efficacy of pronunciation teachers which include insufficient time for instruction, teachers' poor training in both English pronunciation and pronunciation teaching, teachers' uncertainty about their legitimacy to teach pronunciation. However, teachers' responses to the constraints differ significantly. While some teachers tended to avoid teaching this aspect, others delved into this field of challenges with enthusiasm and creativeness. The key factor that makes this tremendous difference seem to be teachers' self-confidence and willingness to teach. This relationship between teachers' confidence in pronunciation teaching and willingness to teach this aspect and their actual practices, however, is complicated. While all self-confident teachers often devoted more time and effort, and included a greater range of activities to teach pronunciation, some teachers of limited self-confidence and much reluctance to teach pronunciation nevertheless kept trying to overcome both external and internal obstacles to maximise their students' chances of improving their English pronunciation.

Given the similar education background, teaching experience, and the same constrained environment in which the teachers were working, one may wonder about the underlying factors that contribute to different levels of confidence and effort teachers devoted to pronunciation teaching. This question deserves further research; possible findings of the strengths of local NNEST teachers in pronunciation teaching would definitely boost the confidence and willingness to teach this aspect of English among NNESTs worldwide, many of whom are currently in doubt about their role as pronunciation teachers (Bai & Yuan, 2018; Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Ma, 2012).

The current study also indicates that despite the acknowledgement of the importance of pronunciation in successful communication in SLA, this recognition has not been well translated into ELT practice in Vietnam given the neglect of pronunciation teaching methodology in TESOL courses and of pronunciation in the English curriculum. Currently, Vietnam is in the process of implementing an impactful and costly project, Project 2020, which aims to make a substantial improvement in the quality of ELT across the national education system, I would like to make some policy recommendations for Vietnamese ELT in relation to the main targets of that project:

Firstly, in achieving the aim of enabling all Vietnamese youths to confidently communicate in English, it is essential that English curricula at all levels of education include pronunciation as a core and assessable component.

Secondly, billions of Vietnamese Dong are being spent in training and re-training teachers of English so that they achieve a certain level of English on the benchmark of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It may be productive to invest a portion of this money into pre-service and in-service training of teachers with a focus on phonology and pronunciation pedagogy to improve the quality of pronunciation teaching and thus enhance Vietnamese learners' oral communication success.

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The Author

Thi Thanh Huyen Phuong is a lecturer in the Department of English of FPT University in Hanoi, Vietnam. Huyen has involved in EFL teaching at different universities in Vietnam for the past 15 years. In 2018, Huyen gained her PhD degree in Applied Linguistics/TESOL at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.

Department of English
FPT University
Hoa Lac High Tech Park, Hanoi, Vietnam
Tel: +84 24 7300 5588
Mobile: + 84 983286616
Email: huyenptt3@fe.edu.vn

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